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ABSTRACT

Two definitions most often used by adult educators to describe competency-based adult education (CBAE) are one posited by Spady (1977) and another formulated by state adult basic education directors. The first, a "prescriptive-consensual" definition, describes conditions of a phenomenon (CBAE) and relies on the experience of acknowledged experts, established practice, and theoretical constructs. It is dependent for its usefulness on a full understanding of six discrete elements--learning outcomes, time, instruction, measurement certification, and program adaptability. The second definition is a broad principle, open to interpretation by individual programs. Four elements of the definition are performance-based processes, demonstrated mastery, basic and life skills, and function proficiently in society. Merging together, elements from the two definitions evoke a series of questions that might be asked to pick out differentiating characteristics of programs to spot examples of CBAE practice. (A checklist incorporating these questions to test programs for CBAE is provided.) (YLB)

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# A FIELD GUIDE TO COMPETENCY-BASED ADULT EDUCATION

OR

## HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S A CBAE?
(with apologies to Roger Tory Peterson)

BY

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esented at the Fifth Annual National Competency-Based Adult Education Conferenc
w Orleans, Louisiana, January 7-9, 1980.

## Introduction

The purpose of this brief paper is twofold: to review two frequently cited definitions of competency-based education and to provide a checklist of indicators (field marks, if you will) derived from these definitions for practical use in the siteing of CBAES.

Much as Roger Tory Peterson presents key characteristics of the Blue Footed Booby, the Pied-Billed Grebe, and the Black Legged Kittiwake in his famous Field Guide to the Birds, the checklist may prove useful in spotting different varieties of CBAE in the field. There are minute differences that separate similar birds in a family, and rather distinct differences that separate the families themselves.

The same thing can be said about competency-based educational practices. There are differences, both minute and gross, which separate CBAE programs. Yet, as with winged creatures, they are all called CBAES. This current effort is a light-hearted attempt to provide assistance to CBAE watchers. It is dedicated to them, with the hope that it will prove a useful tool for the identification of CBAE programs. May they find that rare example of the true species to add to their life lists!

## A Review of Competency-Based Definitions

The enormously successful Peterson system of bird identification includes a visual approach, with attention focused on color, form and detail. CBAE watchers are guided by two often-cited definitions which bear review, for they are the source of the color, form and detail by which competency-based educational programs are identified.

The first definition, posited in a seminal article by Spady (1977), is described by the author as a "prescriptive-consensual" definition, because it describes conditions of a phenomenon (competency-based education) and relies on the experience of acknowledged experts, established practice, and theoretical constructs. His intent is for the definition to be used both as a framework to examine practice and as a set of discrete elements with political, sociological and educational implications. According to Spady, CBE is:

> "a data-based, adaptive, performance-oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record, and certify, within the context of flexible time paramaters, the demonstration of known, explicitly stated and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect successful functioning in life roles."

This concise definition is dependent for its usefulness on a full understanding of six discrete elements. The elements are:

1. Learning Outcomes - they must be clear and explicit with regards to the criteria of performance; they must be known and agreed upon by all with a direct interest in the student's educational progress; they have reasonably concrete behavioral referents and are tied to life roles.
2. Time - since the primary emphasis is on the learning outcome, time must be flexible to accommodate students' needs; students need opportunity to succeed; the validity of courses, class periods, semesters and grading practices is questioned.
3. Instruction - instruction must be varied in approach to offer students opportunity to learn, and must be tied to the learning outcomes to facilitate student accomplishment.
4. Measurement - must be reliable, valid, timely - based on evaluation criteria that is explicit, known and agreed upon, and be criterion-referenced.
5. Certification - verified demonstration of competence constitutes the exclusive criterion for student success, program placement, certification and graduation.
6. Program adaptability - A CBE system must remain sensitive to change indicators, procedures, and settings to diagnose weakness, and for student/system accountability.

In the early daze of CBE, the Spady definition seemed too technical; perhaps not appropriate for use in adult education. Through an effort by Parker and Taylor (1980), a working definition of CBAE was formulated by state ABE directors to be used by practitioners and scholars. This functional definition was the result of a National Invitational Workshop on Adult Competency Education held in 1978 here in Louisiana. It states that:

> "Competency-Based Adult Education (CBAE) is a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic and life skills necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society."

As it stands, this definition is a broad principle, open to interpretation by individual programs. Parker and Taylor, in their book The Delphi Survey (1980), expand on the four elements of this statement. The explicit descriptors are defined as:

1. Performance Based Processes - some behavior or direct action is undertaken by the learner; learner responsibility is fostered in identifying goals, and the methods, techniques, and strategies required to achieve these goals.

2. Demonstrated Mastery - in a CBAE activity, this is the link between the performance process and the predetermined basic or life skill objective.

3. Basic and Life Skills - a distinction here made between primarily cognitive skills such as reading and mathematics, and life skills, which apply basic skills to specific life roles - a more humanistic concern.

4. Function proficiently in society - the term "proficiently" is used to connote progress in accommodating to changes in societal demands; society simply means association with others.

It is clear that the two definitions most often used by adult educators to describe the CBE/CBAE are complimentary, if not in absolute agreement. Merged together, the elements from each evoke a series of questions that might be asked by CBAE watchers as they pick out the differentiating characteristics of programs in order to spot examples of CBAE practice.

The category (in the checklist that follows) titled "sufficient evidence" means that data can be gathered to support the claim that a characteristic element exists in a program. This data might be collected by indirect or direct means. These might include a review of written program plans and proposals, and written policies and practices, interviews with staff and program participants, results of follow-up studies of learners and observations of instruction and assessment practices. Records of learner progress, attrition records, demographic indices, year-end internal evaluations, and reviews of student portfolios are also sources of data. While not inclusive, these suggested techniques or written records represent sources of useful evidence for judgment.

Of course, if there is "insufficient" or "no evidence" of a significant number of differentiating characteristics, the CBAE watcher, by the process of elimination using the vital field marks, must sadly conclude that the bird in question may be something, but not a "true" CBAE!

# CHECKLIST FOR SPOTTING CBAE'S IN THE FIELD

BY RUTH S. NICKSE, Ph.D

| Spady Definition (1977) | Sufficient Evidence | Insufficient Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| 1. CBE is "a data based, adaptive, performance-oriented" | | |
| Does the program: | | |
| a. diagnose each learner's entry/exit level skills using criterion referenced measures? | | |
| b. collect learner progress data? | | |
| c. provide quick feedback to the learner? | | |
| d. collect internal evaluation data on processes and practices? | | |
| e. collect demographic data for learners to determine need/service? | | |
| f. collect follow-up data on learners regarding the programs' impact on self-esteem, further learning and job progress? | | |
| g. define "performance oriented" and require demonstrations other than paper and pencil tests? | | |
| h. use data to revise and improve program counseling, administration, instruction, assessment? | | |
| i. collect and use performance data for diagnosing weaknesses and planning for new learning? | | |
| 2. "set of integrated processes that facilitate instruction, measure, record, and certify" | | |
| Does the program: | | |
| a. use an integrated system of setting specific goals* for instruction, assessment, certification? | | |
| b. provide varieties of instructional strategies tied to goals,and multiple opportunities for learning? | | |
| c. measure performance using a variety of techniques, and provide multiple opportunities for assessment? | | |
| d. record learner progress calibrated directly to specific learning goals? | | |
| e. certify, solely on the basis of demonstration of required learning outcomes, rather than by attendance or course completion? | | |

*The terms "learning goals", "learning outcomes" and "competencies" are synonymous in this Checklist for ease of identification. *Veteran CBAE watchers are urged to add additional marks to refine these differentiating characteristics.

| | Sufficient Evidence | Insufficient Evidence |
|---|---|---|

3. "within the context of flexible time parameters"

   Does the program:

   a. provide flexible time in terms of when, how long, and how often opportunities exist for instruction and evaluation?

   b. reward successful performance regardless of amount of time spent on learning or assessment activities?

4. "the demonstration of known, explicitly stated and agreed upon learning outcomes"

   Does the program:

   a. have written statements of learning outcomes, with explicitly stated criteria, and reasonably concrete behavioral referents?

   b. base rewards on the demonstration of specific, written, learning outcomes?

   c. do the learners have copies of the required learning outcomes at all times?

   d. define "demonstration" to include actual performance or simulations rather than rely solely on results of paper and pencil tests?

   e. provide frequent counseling so that learners are aware of the requirements and their progress?

   f. distinguish between "competencies" and "capacities"?

5. "that reflect successful functioning in life roles."

   Does the program:

   a. organize its instruction and assessment based on learner's life roles, such as producer, consumer, citizen, family member, life long learner?

   b. use an operational definition of the standard, "successful functioning", to evaluate progress?

   c. is the source of the standards for both "successful functioning" and "life roles" documented?

II <u>State ABE Directors' Definition</u> (1978)

1. CBAE is "a performance-based process"

   Does the program:

   a. require some direct action from the learner?

   b. require learner responsibility in activities?

| | Sufficient Evidence | Insufficient Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| c. require the learner (with the teacher-facilitator) to participate in identifying goals, methods, techniques, strategies, to achieve goals? | | |
| d. define "performance" in a number of ways? | | |
| e. require performance in CBAE areas such as employability, personal and family management, civic and social responsibility, athletic and humanistic needs and desires? | | |
| 2. "leading to demonstrated mastery" | | |
| Does the program: | | |
| a. define the standard, "demonstrated mastery"? | | |
| b. instruct and assess to this definition? | | |
| c. recognize the educational value of life experience? | | |
| 3. "of basic and life skills" | | |
| Does the program: | | |
| a. define and require specific basic skills competencies such as reading and mathematics? | | |
| b. define and require basic skills applied to specific life roles? | | |
| c. document the source of data for requiring such skills? | | |
| d. involve the individual, the program, and society's needs in the consideration of the selection of required skills? | | |
| 4. "necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society." | | |
| Does the program: | | |
| a. state operational definitions of the standards "necessary" and "proficiently"? | | |
| b. support the definitions with data? | | |
| c. define "society", (for example, in the home, at work, in an educational setting), as citizen, family member, worker, parent, and use of leisure time? | | |

QUICK POINT SCALE FOR SCORING A CBAE SITEING -

there are 40 field marks in the checklist; evidence of each equals 2.5 points, for a possible total of 100 points.

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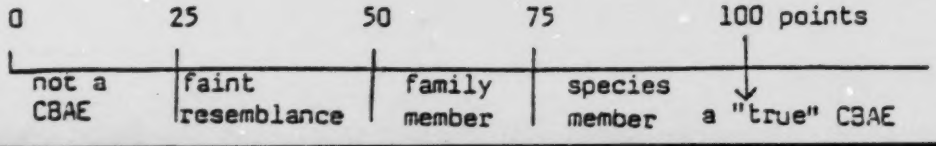

## NOTES

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